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ABSTRACT

In spite of a diminishing amount of money available for educational research, a demand still exists for research and evaluation. This paper discusses how to initiate cooperative research between local education agencies and neighboring universities and educational labs and centers. First, the paper identifies problems in the development of cooperative research. Next, it describes the consortium approach to research and details purposes of a metropolitan research partnership. Organizational processes of such a cooperative and predetermined criteria for research are also discussed. The paper concludes that the development of a metropolitan research partnership might be a logical first step to the planning and implementing of large-scale research and evaluation. (Author/LD)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A METROPOLITAN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Cooperative research and evaluation efforts between local education agencies (LEAs), universities, and educational labs and centers have progressed from being considered an innovation to being viewed as an operational necessity. The research on schools for which "outside" agencies have long been responsible, and the research in schools practiced by LEA based offices of research and evaluation, have now reached the point where they cannot be conducted separately, if either is to be effective.

A number of problems exist in the development of cooperative research between universities, labs and centers, and LEAs. Perhaps the pivotal problem is the view that research conducted by "outside" agencies is basic, traditional academic research, and that LEA conducted research is operations research of a limited nature. Another problem relates to the use made of research findings. University research typically has been designed to test hypotheses and generate new knowledge. Labs and centers also engage in the traditional variety of research as well as general curriculum development initiatives based upon research results. LEA efforts, on the other hand, have often been geared toward decision alternatives and are usually program specific. Other commonly held problems relate to access to information, availability of resources, and organizational constraints.

There are a number of ways by which cooperative research efforts may be initiated. This paper will discuss a formalized consortium approach. The educational significance of such an approach is predicated upon the fact that, in spite of a diminishing amount of money available for educational research, there is a greater demand than ever for research and evaluation results. Though the universities and labs and centers may have superior resources, and the LEAs have developed the capacity to control access to data, none of these organizations

function most effectively alone. All gain from cooperative research efforts, especially when the research impacts upon instructional and administrative practice.

A RATIONALE FOR COOPERATION

A number of problems exist in the development of cooperative research between universities, labs and centers and LEAs. Perhaps the pivotal problem, as previously mentioned, is the view that "outside" agency research on schools is basic, traditional (experimental/control, pretest/posttest) academic research, and that LEA conducted research in schools is viewed as operations research of a "quick and dirty" and, usually limited, nature. Another problem relates to the use made of research findings. "Outside" agency research typically has been designed to test hypotheses and generate new knowledge. LEA research and evaluation efforts are most often geared to provide information usable by decision makers and are usually program specific.

Labs and centers, universities and LEAs all share the problem of access. Outsiders are no longer automatically welcomed into school districts for the puposes of conducting research. School districts now have certain legal responsibilities which, coupled with their own newly developed research and evaluation capacities, have made them more independent than in the past. However, universities and labs and centers still maintain the overwhelming majority of individuals with the time, resources, and training critical to the conduct of educational research.

If bridging the gap between research on schools and research in schools provides a philosophically liberal reason to devise cooperative approaches, problems of access serves as a strong practical counterbalance. Nothing is either more philosophically critical or practically necessary, however, than the provision of adequate resources. Without funds, research and evaluation

activities would soon cease. The mind might continue to generate hypotheses, but who would finance the hands to test them? Fiscal stability has not been a characteristic of urban school systems during the past decade, and offices of research and evaluation tend not to be among the top funding priorities of under-funded school districts.

The need for additional funds has been well documented, most recently by Webster and Stufflebeam in the 1978 AERA address "The State of Theory and Practice in Educational Evaluation in Large Urban School Districts." In 1977, they surveyed the largest urban school districts, and found that the 35 which responded spent approximately $13 million of non-categorical (non-federal) funds on evaluation. This total, however, represented a scant fifteen-hundredths of one percent of the districts' general fund educational expenditures. Even with a higher percentage of federal education money being spent for evaluation (1.8 percent), the overall picture is still bleak. (An average of three-tenths of one percent of the total school district budget).

As Webster and Stufflebeam point out, "In the real world of applied evaluation and research, emphasis translates to money....Evaluation, if implemented adequately, is cost-effective but not cheap." From all indications, however, the provision of additional resources for evaluation is unlikely to be achieved.

Funds for education research may be even more difficult to secure in colleges and universities. Typically such institutions depend upon federal grants and school contracts to support the majority of their activities. With the flow of money from Washington slowing markedly, and many school districts developing an in-house research and evaluation capacity, university research is also girding for a lean period. The labs and centers are affected by many of the same fiscal problems faced by school districts and universities.

Though outwardly, most seem financially sound, their numbers have been regularly reduced over the past decade.

The provision of sufficient resources to conduct educational and evaluation research is a concern of school districts, universities, and educational labs and centers alike. Cooperative approaches to research and evaluation, particularly through a consortium arrangement, may provide one solution to this concern.

THE CONSORTIUM APPROACH AND FOCUS

There are a number of approaches to cooperative research. The consortium approach connotes a formal relationship between participating organizations, with specific guidelines being established in advance. Informal relationships, on the other hand, form the basis for the most common approach to cooperative research, and most often result from personal relationships between "outside" agency and school district personnel. Solicited cooperative research projects, though still uncommon, represent what may be the wave of the future. Such arrangements are generally initiated by LEA offices of research and evaluation and serve to advise universities or labs and centers of research topics which LEAs would be interested in pursuing. Hybrid varieties of the above approaches may account for still additional possibilities.

To best serve the needs and foster the growth of educational research and evaluation in large urban centers, the consortium approach might prove to be a particularly appropriate alternative. Such an approach might be initiated by the development of a Metropolitan Education Development Cooperative. The principal purposes or foci of such a Cooperative might include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. To share information concerning ongoing activities.

This is the pivotal focus of the Cooperative. It is because of the historical failure of metropolitan institutions with interest in educational research and evaluation to share information that the Cooperative idea germinated. Universities and educational labs and centers seldom are aware of what is occurring in school systems, except in such areas as might relate directly to their ongoing research or curriculum development projects. Conversely, school systems may have little, if any knowledge of existing or potential research and evaluation resources available at universities and labs and centers. Of equal concern is the lack of knowledge about which professionals have interest or are presently conducting research in particular areas. Often agencies go far afield to bring in an expert when an individual with as much, if not more knowledge is available locally.

2. To develop a metropolitan area joint research agenda.

The scatter-gun approach to educational research and evaluation is neither cost-effective nor productive in terms of educational decision making. If research and evaluation initiatives are ultimately to succeed, they must be carefully coordinated and minutely planned. The potential strength of a Cooperative when brought to bear in developing a metropolitan joint research agenda is considerable. A jointly developed agenda

can simultaneously serve both the needs of individual agencies as well as the needs of all agencies comprising the Cooperative. More important, however, is the ability of the Cooperative to help identify the educational needs of the metropolitan area in working with business groups (such as the chamber of commerce); citizens groups (such as the local urban education coalition); and governmental agencies (such as the metropolitan planning commission). In doing so, a blue print for progress through cooperative educational research and evaluation can be developed.

3. To pool knowledge and resources in attempting to solve metropolitan educational problems.

Such a cooperative would rely heavily upon sharing existing resources and ideas. For example, if a lab or center has already developed a suitable literacy test, is it necessary for a school district to develop another one or to contract with a publishing company to do so? If a university has available experts in the area of data processing, they might be utilized to assist the school district in exchange for computer time on the school district's hardware. The difference in orientation among university professors, school district research and evaluation personnel and lab and center staff is a distinct plus, in that it would most likely result in a broader range of solutions being considered for each problem.

4. To facilitate cooperative research studies.

The sharing of unique facilities, resources, and personnel can provide for the type of symbiotic relationship which is beneficial to all organizations within the Cooperative. In addition, the Cooperative might work to encourage other outside research and evaluation agencies, with expertise and interest in areas other than those available within the Cooperative, to work with the Cooperative in the conduct of rather specialized research and evaluation projects.

5. To develop cooperative data bases.

One of the most costly aspects of conducting research and evaluation is large scale data collection. Large urban school districts are now moving in the direction of the development of computerized directory type information files. These files, particularly if auxiliary, compatible data files are also available (e.g., a testing file and specialized program files in such areas as early childhood, Title One, or English for Speakers of Other Languages) might be utilized by universities and labs and centers in the conduct of specialized research. The sharing of such files would enable research and evaluation to be conducted at a more rapid rate by interested consortium members than would be the case if base-line data had to be collected for each project. Labs and centers often also

maintain data bases, particularly in areas relating to curriculum development projects on which they are working. Such information might be of particular use to school district curriculum personnel in helping to test out new programs and projects. The development of cooperative data bases with universities has a number of potential payoffs. For example, a personnel data file might be quite useful in developing and assessing teacher training programs as well as following-up university students who have pursued a career teaching in the metropolitan area. In addition, there would be extensive possibilities for the conduct of statistical hypothesis testing.

6. To develop research, development and evaluation pre-service and inservice training activities.

School district, university, and educational lab and center personnel, by virtue of their different orientations, might well profit by an opportunity to observe and participate in the daily functioning of each of the other related agencies. The Cooperative might develop a research and evaluation revolving internship which could, for example, provide university professors an opportunity to "re-tool" by spending time in a school district, and school district evaluators to re-charge their theoretical batteries at a university. Educational labs and centers with expertise in staff training might provide inservice work in measurement

and evaluation for school district personnel, while universities might work with a school district to develop a sequence of pre-service research and evaluation courses designed to prepare school-system-based evaluation personnel.

7. To take joint political initiatives and postures in areas which impact upon educational research, development and evaluation.

   Not only is there strength in numbers, but three or more different types of organizations acting out of a common concern would most likely be accorded considerably more attention than a single interest group. The potential for a Metropolitan Educational Development Cooperative to help shape or re-shape federal and state policy in the area of educational research and evaluation is considerable. In doing so additional resources for the conduct of research and evaluation might be secured, as might higher levels of general education funding for urban/metropolitan areas. The Cooperative might also work together in reviewing governmental data collection activities to prevent unrealistic large scale data requirements from being foisted upon school districts, universities or labs and centers, both in relation to their standard operation and to their interest in conducting research.

8. To develop joint (cooperative) proposal initiatives

   Given the governmental proclivity to favor jointly developed funding proposals in the area of educational research and evaluation, this particular focus of the

Cooperative has the potential to be particularly profitable. More important, however, is the potential to develop higher quality proposals as a result of cooperative "brainstorming" activities. In addition, by working together, individual organizations could avoid "re-inventing the wheel" as well as wasting proposal development resources by competing for the same funds.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES

In the initial planning of a Metropolitan Educational Development Cooperative, a meeting might be called by the chief executive officer of one of the potential cooperating agencies to discuss the notion, focus and logistics of such a cooperative with his or her counterparts in the other potential member organizations.

For a Cooperative to work most effectively, it must be both comprehensive (in terms of type and number of organizations), yet limited (in terms of the total number of cooperating partners to ensure its manageability). It is no accident that Cooperatives might be most easily formed in larger metropolitan areas, for such areas are most likely to contain (1) a school district of sufficient size to support an inhouse office of research and evaluation, (2) one or more colleges or universities with graduate faculties of education or related social sciences, and (3) a governmentally funded education laboratory or center. These three types of organizations might form the crux of the Cooperative.

It is essential in terms of the Cooperative's founding and first year of operation that the chief executive officer of each group, (e.g., the

associate superintendent for research and evaluation, the dean of the college of education, and the director of the educational lab or center) represent the organization. Once the Cooperative has been established and is operating smoothly, it might be possible for other organizational personnel to take a more active role.

At the outset, the number of participating groups might be limited to half a dozen. A single large school district and a single lab or center might be preferable, though there certainly would be room for several universities. It is not suggested that other school districts in the metropolitan area be involved until the Cooperative becomes fully operational. This is due largely to the fact that smaller school districts may not be in a position to contribute their share at the outset, and, as a result, might slow down the Cooperative's development. It is also important to avoid inclusion of commercial (for profit) test development or research and evaluation firms in the formation of the Cooperative. Perhaps, at some later point, commercial organizations might come to the Cooperative and make use of its services. At the time of its development, however, the Cooperative should be wary of commercial intrusion.

A Cooperative's gestation period might well last a full year, during which time the chief executives of the cooperating organizations might meet on a monthly basis for the purposes of planning, development, feedback and refining. Toward the end of the planning year, a specific series of recommended initiatives should be forthcoming. Such initiatives (e.g., the development of a joint proposal) might be utilized to test the viability of the Cooperative and also to identify weaknesses in its organizational structure.

Though the Cooperative provides a process whereby educational research and evaluation is conducted on a mutually beneficial/shared resources basis, it should not constitute a monopoly. The member organizations must, of course, retain their functional autonomy. Many of the research and evaluation thrusts of the member organizations will be of little or no interest to the Cooperative, or may be beyond its technical limits and/or organizational parameters. The Cooperative should serve as a resource to its member organizations; not vice versa.

In certain instances, the Cooperative may wish to act together in eliciting "one-shot" cooperative research relationships with other "outside" agencies or individuals or in screening non-solicited requests from non-members. In order to effectively screen such requests, a Cooperative Research Review Panel might be constituted. This panel, comprised of representatives of each member organization, might also serve to review and prioritize the Cooperative's own research agenda. Decisions regarding the Cooperative's proposed research and evaluation initiatives should be predicated upon how well each initiative meets a set of predetermined criteria. The criteria might include:

1. General Significance of the Project. Will the project deal with major issues in education? Will it contribute to a growing body of theory on some aspect of education? Can the conduct of it contribute in any way to improved educational practice -- either immediately or ultimately?
2. Utility of the Focus of the Cooperative. Does the project deal with problems which are of immediate importance to the Cooperative's member organizations? Will the conduct of it aid in the solution of one or more of these problems? (While a direct utility to the Cooperative is not essential for approval of an "outside" project, those with this characteristic

should receive priority. The Cooperative will sometimes be able to suggest research problems of interest.)

3. Soundness of the Research Design. Is the project designed in such a way that its objectives are likely to be met? Is it designed so that valid answers to the questions asked are likely to be obtained?
4. Interference with School Practice. To what extent will the project interfere with ongoing operation of the school district? Is it likely to harm any child in any way? Does it place undue burden on teachers, principals, or other school administrative personnel? (For example, September and June are particularly hectic months in the schools.)
5. Extent of Cooperative Involvement Requested. What - if any - resources are being requested from the Cooperative? (Extensive expenditure of staff time or material resources may not be able to be entertained without compensation to the participating agency.)

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Earlier in this paper, it was suggested that a major rationale for establishing cooperative educational research and evaluation efforts was the lack of adequate resources. Should the opposite situation occur, however, -- that is, should additional funds for research and evaluation suddenly become available -- such cooperative efforts would remain just as important, if not more so.

The mere fact that additional resources might become available does not lessen the recipients' responsibility to utilize the resources wisely. Along with additional funds comes additional accountability.

In January, the AERA Congressional Liaison Director proposed to administration officials that 5 percent of the Nation's education budget

should be earmarked for research and evaluation activities. Should this suggestion ever be implemented, it would result in approximately $600 million being appropriated for research (e.g.,5 percent of $12 billion appropriated for educational activities in 1979.) Failure to carefully plan the expenditure of funds of this magnitude would be catastrophic. It would signal to the public and the Congress that research and evaluation really is incapable of helping to improve education and is an inappropriate vehicle in which to invest scarce public dollars.

A cooperative approach to planning and implementing large scale research and evaluation activities represents a viable process alternative; and since a significant percentage of federal monies are directed toward the improvement of educational practices in urban areas, the development of metropolitan research partnerships might well be a logical first step.